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ABSTRACT

A summary is presented of a 2-year ethnographic study of the intake process (involving assessment, placement, and educational programming) of 12 Hispanic deaf and hearing-impaired children, aged 3-8. The study, titled "Schooling the Different: Ethnographic Case Studies of Hispanic Deaf Children's Initiation into Formal Schooling" by Adrian Bennett, collected data from formal assessments, case conferences, teacher/parent meetings, written reports, and home and classroom interactions. The study revealed gaps between policy guidelines and actual practice, especially concerning the measurement of the needs and abilities of the children and the active participation of parents. The study found that the source of "problems" was attributed to the child or home environment rather than to the interaction between the child and classroom milieu. In general, Hispanic parents demonstrated skill in providing strong supportive relationships within the family for their deaf or hearing-impaired children, but lacked the knowledge needed to make their voices heard in institutional systems. Implications of these findings are outlined. (JDD)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON HANDICAPPED AND GIFTED CHILDREN

ERIC/OSEP SPECIAL PROJECT ON INTERAGENCY INFORMATION DISSEMINATION

RESEARCH & RESOURCES ON SPECIAL EDUCATION

ABSTRACT 20
OCTOBER 1988

ASSESSMENT AND EDUCATION OF YOUNG HISPANIC CHILDREN WITH DEAFNESS

The low achievement of two groups of students—those of Hispanic background and those with deafness or hearing impairment—has been of concern to educators. There are indications that students who are both Hispanic and deaf or hearing impaired do less well in school than students with either of these characteristics alone. However, the extent to which their low achievement is due to social and communication factors rather than to cognitive or physical disabilities is unknown. It has been suggested that the academic problems of these students are the historical outcome of their interactions with the rest of society.

Schooling the Different: Ethnographic Case Studies of Hispanic Deaf Children's Initiation into Formal Schooling reports a 2-year ethnographic study of the intake process involving the assessment, placement, and educational programming of 12 Hispanic deaf and hearing impaired 3- to 8-year-olds. The report includes an annotated bibliography organized by the following topics: (a) decision making processes (assessment, placement, institutional constraints); (b) language/communication (language development, discourse, bilingualism, sociocultural dimensions of language; (c) education (special education, bilingual-bicultural education, parent/child education, teachers' expectations and attitudes, classroom management); (d) anthropological/ethnographic research on deaf persons; (e) cross cultural issues; (f) research theory and methodology; and (g) needs assessment. The study is also the subject of a forthcoming book. (Reference information is provided at the end of this summary.)

METHOD

Case studies were conducted in two settings: a private school for the deaf and a public school system. Seven children in the private school were monitored from their initial assessments through their initial 30 days in the classroom. When possible, contact was maintained with the parents throughout the 2 years of the study. Testing and placement of two other children in the private school were monitored. In the public school setting, assessments of four children were monitored.

The perspectives of administrators, teachers, assessment personnel, parents, and the children were taken into account in the study. Participant observation, interviews, reviews of records, and audio and video recordings were used to collect data on all aspects of the intake process: formal assessments, case conferences, teacher/parent meetings, written reports (including IEPs and correspondence with state education officials), and home and classroom interactions.

Ethnographic methodology requires that data be reviewed and analyzed as the study progresses and that these analyses be used to shape the remainder of the study. In this study, two important issues evolved: (a) the interface between the home/community and school and (b) the child's initiation into formal schooling.

The project conducted a background survey of assessment practices for intake of deaf Hispanic students. Four State agencies, 18 local agencies, and 25 institutions completed an information form. Of these, 14 agreed to extensive follow-up telephone interviews. Ethnographic methods were used for the interview protocols: each interview was based on responses to the information questionnaire. The interviews yielded information about placement procedures, testing, and assessment personnel; parent involvement, support, and education; and the ethnicity of the populations served.

RESULTS

Gaps were found between policy guidelines and actual practice, especially concerning the measurement of the needs and abilities of the children, and the active participation of parents. The children displayed a variety of social and communicative strategies that were not always recognized by school staff nor always displayed in their presence. In general, professionals defined children's identities with reference to the sociocultural world of the school. For example, a child who did not cooperate in the testing situation was defined as "oppositional" rather than engaging in justifiable resistance to the demands of the situation as experienced by the child. In fact, the experience of testing as a social situation involving the construction of a particular social reality was generally left out of consideration in case conferences, assessment reports, and IEPs. This was often true in classrooms as well.

The source of "problems" was attributed to the child or home environment rather than to the interaction between the child and classroom milieu. It was rare to hear the professional staff criticize any aspect of that milieu or to even raise doubts about its implications for the child's response to schooling. The authors noted that a more accurate understanding of the child in his or her relationship to the ongoing social processes in the classroom could be very valuable to teachers and related services personnel.

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In general, Hispanic parents demonstrated considerable skill in providing strong supportive relationships within the family for their deaf or hearing impaired children, but lacked the knowledge needed to make their voices heard in institutional systems. Although they diligently attended intake tests and conferences, their participation was minimal. Most Hispanic parents did not have a thorough understanding of their role in the intake process even when, in their own view, professional staff had made particular efforts to inform them. Most of the parents had a general and vague idea of how different parts of the intake process related to each other or how the process itself fitted into the overall educational system.

Staff whose role was to act as intermediary between school and parents were not always able to be effective. They sometimes felt they were caught in conflicts between the social and cultural worlds of the school and the children's homes and neighborhoods. These conflicts were characteristic of the positions of administrators, teachers, and testing staff in general.

School professionals were usually aggressive in defining the parameters of social relations—they seemed to believe that this was their role and would sometimes suggest that parents alter home environments, including how to communicate with and discipline their deaf child. This was generally either presented as "the ways things are done" or "in the best interests of the child." In response to this attitude, Hispanic parents usually found themselves in a defensive position.

Many administrators were concerned with providing equal opportunities to Hispanic children and were aware that Hispanic parents participated on a minimal level. They were willing to explore means of improving relations with their Hispanic clientele. However, organizational obstacles to parent participation within both school systems were noted. There were logistical difficulties caused by the organizational and geographical distances between key sites in the intake process. If appropriate programs were not available within the school system, a diffusion of authority occurred which tended to confuse parents and defuse any objections they may have had.

IMPLICATIONS

The authors' recommendations include using assessment and teaching practices that take into account the child's interactions and responses to the class environment and providing structures for increasing parent participation. Contexts for interpreting behavior should include both classroom and home and should be analyzed in terms of the subject's and family's position in a larger social structure, including class relations and the school's assumptions about "structure" and "appropriate behavior," as well as about what children need to learn in preschool. It is difficult to teach children who are deaf such skills as discipline and pre-math, reading, and writing skills. Current pedagogical methods require considerable compliance to teacher direction. Those children who cannot comply may fall behind or be incorrectly placed in programs for students with emotional disturbances or learning disabilities. Educators and other professionals need to be sensitized to the cultural and communicative differences of minority groups such as Hispanics.

Parents can play an important role in mediating differences and potential conflicts between the social and cultural aspects of the school and the children's homes and neighborhoods. There is a need for strong parent organizations that make collective action a possibility. However, the law treats parents and families as individual units isolable from their communities rather than as a collective force. Changes in the law are needed if effective parent participation is to be encouraged. Structures should be built into the law that ensure that parents are provided opportunities to develop such organizations.

Overall, the authors recommend: (a) changes in legal guidelines and organizational structures within special education, (b) training programs for policymakers and educators, and (c) training and information programs for Hispanic parents.

Schooling the Different: Ethnographic Case Studies of Hispanic Deaf Children's Initiation into Formal Schooling. February 1987. 237 pp. Adrian T. Bennett, The Lexington Center, Jackson Heights, New York. U.S. Department of Education Grant No. G008400653. Available in early 1989 for $.82 (microfiche) or $19.40 (hard copy), plus postage, from ERIC Document Reproduction Service, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, VA 22304 (1-800-227-3742). EC number 211 086; ED number is not yet available.

Schooling the Different: Incorporating Deaf Hispanic Children and Families into Special Education. 1988. Adrian T. Bennett. London: Taylor & Francis. Order No. 1 85000 305X (clothbound) or 1 85000 306 8 (paperback) from Taylor & Francis, Rankine Road, Basingstoke, Hants RG24 OPR, UK.

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